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ABSTRACT

One of the goals of Project Onderbouw in the Netherlands is to develop an educational concept and curricula to be used in primary education. The educational concept adopted for the project is termed "developmental education." Based on neo-Vygotskian principles and other theoretical approaches, "developmental education" emphasizes: (1) education's contributions to broad development, with many-sided personality development as its highest aim; (2) situations and activities which have meaning for children; and (3) a mediated action role for the teacher. Based on the conviction that children's development is under the influence of the sociocultural environment and can consequently be affected intentionally, the project sought to identify core activities that are meaningful for children and have potential developmental value. These core activities are play activities, in which manipulative, movement, role, and rule play can take place; constructive activities, in which children are functionally "at work" in a productive way; conversation activities, including dialogues, interactions, and discussions between individual children or small groups of children and the teacher; reading and writing activities; and mathematical activities. To develop high-quality activities in these areas and create conditions for subsequent development, teachers must understand the developmental perspectives that provide a framework for the activities. A practical application of this approach can be seen in the development of early literacy through role play. (AC)

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ED 369 477

FROM PLAY ACTIVITY TOWARD LEARNING ACTIVITY

Developmental Perspectives in Early Childhood Education

Paper for the Third European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education
September 1993
Kriopigi, Greece

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Algemeen Pedagogisch Studiecentrum (APS)

The APS is a national institute for school improvement in the Netherlands. Its work focuses on primary and special education, on schools for secondary education, on teacher training colleges and school advisary centres for teacher support. The APS is also responsible for advising the government and institutions on educational policy and planning.

Project 'Onderbouw' (Early Education in Primary Schools)

'Onderbouw' is the name of one of the APS-projects. The project contributes to the improvement of early childhood education. The target groups of this project are teacher training colleges, which offer initial training for future teachers and supplementary training for teachers working in primary schools; and school advisary centres which are responsible for teacher support and for the educational innovations at school-level.
The main tasks of the project group are:

* the development of an educational concept and of curricula at the level of primary education;
* the development of materials (written, audio-visual) to be used in teacher training colleges and school advisary centres;
* the training of teacher trainers and school counselors;
* advising at the level of institutional policy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In The Netherlands a heated discussion is going on about the question what the best approach is with regard to the education of young children.
It already started before 1985 when the integrated primary school (that is to say pre-primary schools for 4- to 6-year-olds and primary schools for 6- to 12-year-olds combined) was on its way. Many feared that early education would give way under the pressure of primary education and would gradually become more academic. There was indeed a tendency in that direction after 1985: class teaching and course methods made their entry in quite a few nursery classes due to various circumstances (see Janssen-Vos, 1991).
This tendency has not persevered on a large scale according to surveys carried out. On the contrary, researchers point at a consolidation of the traditional character of the pre-integration early education.
This consolidation deserves, in our opinion, as little appreciation as the dreaded tendency towards more academic teaching. We are convinced that traditional education of young children was and is badly in need of a thorough innovation. We do not stand alone in this conviction. Various persons and instititions advocate changes. Opinions differ, however, on the nature of those changes. In the discussions there are two distinct schools of thought, often referred to as 'developmental education' and 'programme-oriented education'. (Van Oers, 1992; Inspectie van het onderwijs, 1992; Janssen-Vos, 1993) Unfortunately these two concepts are quite often simplified to two extreme points of view or 'caricatures'. In the one extreme the main emphasis is said to be on children's interest and initiative, combined with open educational situations and free play, whereas the opposite extreme emphasizes programmes and teaching subject matter with children objected to strongly prestructured educational situations. The result of such a simplification is that many discussions end in a deadlock.
In our opinion schools are served better by a well-considered, well-founded and well-reasoned educational concept, which points out the practical consequences and provides criteria and instructions for those changes in traditional education that are considered necessary.

With a view to this the APS-project 'Onderbouw' (Dutch for early education, for children from 4 to 8) is working on the development, dissemination and implementation of an educational concept and curriculum for young children within the context of the integrated primary school.
In order to create a theoretical base for the concept, some recent and (in The Netherlands) well-known approaches were studied: the cultural-historical approach of Vygotskij and others (Van Oers, 1987, 1991; Van Parreren, 1985, 1988), the theory on experiential education (Laevers, 1982, 1989) and the social-learning approach (Colberg-Schrader, 1980).
We see these approaches as supplementary. For us, the neo-Vygotskian approach offers the most complete and coherent concept in which developmental and educational theories are integrated. In The Netherlands there is a great deal of expertise in the neo-Vygotskian and cultural-historical field present and available (e.g.see Van Oers: Semiotic activity of young chidren in play: the construction and use of schematic representations, 1993). Thanks to this expertise the project group is able to work out a responsible, coherent and innovative practice theory that meets demands in educational practice and contributes to more effective education.

In 1992 we had the opportunity to present some characteristics of the concept and curriculum at The Second European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education in Worcester. The title of the presentation and paper was: 'Quality in the classroom: the key role of the teacher' (Janssen-Vos, 1992). At the Third Conference in 1993 we have the pleasure of presenting another essential element of concept as well as curriculum: core activities and their developmental perspectives.

The eleboration of this element shows which stand we take with regard to the discussion about the two extreme approaches mentioned above.
We will successively pay attention to:
* Fundamental issues of developmental education
* Core activities and developmental perspectives
* Practical application: play and emergent literacy

2. FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES OF DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION

A study of the theoretical approaches mentioned above and especially neo-Vygotskian principles have led to establishing an educational concept named developmental education. Some fundamental issues of this concept are the following (Janssen-Vos, 1990, 1992, 1992a):
* The essential foundation: development is not a natural process; children are subject to social influence; they are 'educatable' or 'teachable' from the very beginning.
* Therefore, the teacher's role as initiator and stimulator of developmental processes, is extremely important. The teachers role is one of mediated action; they are both educators and educational means.
* Taking the initiatives, involvement, and participation in situations that are meaningful and make sense for children are prerequisites for effective educational activities.
* The zone of proximal development is the starting point of teachers' and childrens' joint activities.
* Developmental stages are defined in terms of leading motives and activities: from manipulative play and role play toward learning activity.
* Early education needs to contribute to the improvement of a child's learning abilities, productive thinking and the development of learning motives.

The principles of developmental education can be summarized by three interrelated elements. One is concerned with **the aims of education**. Education needs to contribute to broad development; a many-sided personality development is the highest aim, which includes fundamental knowledge and skills. A second element places special emphasis on **meaning**; only situations and activities which have or can have meaning for children can contribute to development. And a third element concerns the **mediated action of the teacher** in integrating personal meanings of children and cultural transfer.
These three elements constitute the foundations of the curriculum for primary education. Education of the youngest children (4- to 8-year-olds) in primary schools occupies a special place because of the developmental characteristics of this age-group. The concept 'Basic Development' indicates this special place: it refers to that part of the curriculum which precedes teaching academics, it helps children to attain the conditions required to take part in the formal school programme (not to be confused with the acquisition of pre-academic skills by training programs!).
The following information about the three elements can clarify the essentials of Basic Development.

a. Educational aims

In developmental education priorities are given to the broad personality development. Consequently this also pertains to the intentions of Basic Development in which we distinguish three different, but interrelated areas:
* **Basic characteristics**: characteristics of a psychological nature which are prerequisites and aimss at the same time; e.g. a positive self-esteem and curiosity.

* **Broad development:** long-term aims in which direction development should proceed like communication, reasoning and problem-solving, self-regulation and reflection.
* **Specific knowledge and skills:** examples are found in the area's of motor skills, perception, schemes and symbols.

The circle diagram shows the three areas. In the centre the basic characteristics, in the middle broad developmental aims, and in the outer circles we see the specific knowledge and skills. The inner and middle circles apply to (primary) education in general; the outer circles change over time, together with the progression of the child's development and the new aims which are set for formal education.

b. Meaningful activities

The intentions of Basic Development cannot be taught directly but are attained via a more indirect way with the help of two mediators. Activities which are (or could become) meaningful for children and that have high developmental value as well, serve as the first mediator.

Several issues of developmental education draw attention to activities as a developmental means: e.g. the key concept 'zone of proximal development'. Van Oers refers to the zone of proximal development as a socio-cultural activity in which a child wants to participate but is unable to perform by itself, only with another person who takes care of those parts which the child does not control yet (Van Oers, 1987). A child achieves more in cooperation with adults than by itself. This achievement is not unlimited, however, but always within boundaries set by developmental levels and intellectual potentials (Van Oers, 1992 a).

Thinking of activities that are important for development, we can conclude that they should be of a socio-cultural nature. But we have yet another indication when we look at the developmental stages mentioned before, which are defined in terms of leading motives and activities: manipulative play, role play and learning activity.

The zone of proximal development also makes statements about the involvement of teachers in these activities. Joint activities have a high developmental value because in these activities the teacher can act as the more knowledgeable partner. The teacher is the second mediator in developmental processes.

c. The teacher as mediator

The third element of developmental education draws attention to the role of the teacher. The teacher does more than organise and take part in activities that are attractive and meaningful for children, for the teacher also has the other end in mind: the educational aims of Basic Development.
The mediatorial character of the teacher role is clearly expressed in the selection of activities which are development-inductive:

* these activities should not only be (or become) meaningful and interesting for young children;
* they should also be important social activities in which children can participate at their own level;
* they should, moreover, bring about experiences contributing to the aims of Basic Development.

Besides the selection of activities, the mediating task of the teacher is found in the active part they take in performing the activities. Teachers 'assist' the children in such a way by which the quality of the activity increases and the meaning that the child attaches to the activity can grow. They direct not only the performance of the activity, but the connected developmental processes at the same time

So far this summary of the main issues of developmental education. Subsequently we will determine the developmental potentials of educational activities.

3. CORE ACTIVITIES AND DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVES

Developmental education is based on the conviction that development is under the influence of the socio-cultural environment and can consequently be intentionally affected. With the help of the intentions of Basic Development we have made clear in which direction, in our opinion, this affection needs to proceed. Subsequently we have determined that development is effected and may consequently be affected by means of activities that are (or could become) meaningful for children and that have potential developmental value.
The next step in our argumentation concerns the question which activities essentially stimulate development in early education.

Core activities

In the preceding section indications have already been mentioned as to how relevant activities for young children should be selected. With the additional help of the theory of leading motives and activities we come to the characterization of a number of activities that are essentially necessary for young children.

These core activities are:

* **Play activities**: open activities in which, among other things, manipulative play, movement play, role play and rule play can take place.
* **Constructive activities** in which children are functionally 'at work' in a constructive and productive way; for example, with building material and with paper or cardboard.
* **Conversation activities**: dialogues, interactions, conversations, discussions between individual children or small groups of children and the teacher, whether or not in connection with other activities.
* **Reading and writing activities**: activities in which children are enagaged in language in spoken, written and printed form. For example reading picture books, making language-drawings, composing their own texts.
* **Mathematical activities** in which children acquire experiences with matehematical characteristics of reality.

The core activities reflect the total developmental process; the development of language and thought, for example, runs parallel to the leading activities. Language and thought are at first tied up with concrete objects and situations, with the here-and-now, starting from manipulative activities. As play develops in the direction of role play the child learns to think more on the basis of mental images, it learns to think ahead, to reflect, to reason and to argumentate.
By creating developmental activities, possibilities are available to stimulate development in its totality; this is the principle which underlies the importance we attach to core activities.

It is, therefore, not only a question of the possibility to participate in these core activities. It is first and foremost a question af the development of the quality of these activities. Properly speaking, only then may a great deal of value be attached to these core activities, if teachers are able to enhance the quality, so that motives and 'conditions' are created for subsequent stages.
This means that the teacher must have a concept of that development to be able to lead those activities into a certain direction. Within that framework we have determined developmental perspectives.

Developmental perspectives

General perspectives
First of all a general developmental perspective consitutes the guiding principle of Basic Development. The fact is that the development from play activity toward learning activity is the perspective which holds for early education in general. The motives and possibilities to take part in the learning activity (learning for its own sake) should be largely established by the end of the first few grades of primary education (at about the age of 7).

There is a second general perspective pertaining to the extent in which children participate in core activities independently, that is that children participate in activities first together with the teacher or other more knowledgeable partners and are assisted in those parts that they cannot yet cope with on their own, on the basis of which they are more and more able to perform an activity independently.

Developmental perspectives of core activities
The general developmental perspectives are supplemented by perspectives connected with core activities. Not the fact that a child participates in an activity is relevant but the way in which this is done and the development proceeding in the activity determines the value of it.
Developmental perspectives enable the teachers to create situations for children that could lead

both to meaningful and involving activities and in which they can express their own guiding and affecting role.

To illustrate this we will give an example of **developmental perspectives pertaining to play activities**. We will characterize 6 closely connected kinds of play activities that develop in a certain direction:

a. *Movement play:*
   From mere movement (movement for its own sake) toward functional movements and movements integrated in other play activities (the role play).

b. *Manipulative play:*
   From mere manipulation and repetition toward role inherent play actions, connected with the use of language.

c. *Free, expressive play:*
   From pure acting out or working off toward gradually more reflection and a connection between acting out and speaking out.

d. *Role play:*
   From individual role inherent actions toward thematic play, with others, starting from a joint play concept in which language and actions are inherent to a role.

e. *Constructive-integrated play:*
   From arbitrary, experimental and incidental constructions toward constructions that have a a function in other (play) activities.

f. *Rule play*
   From playing seperately, individually and on the basis of individual interests toward play with a joint perspective and accepted rules.

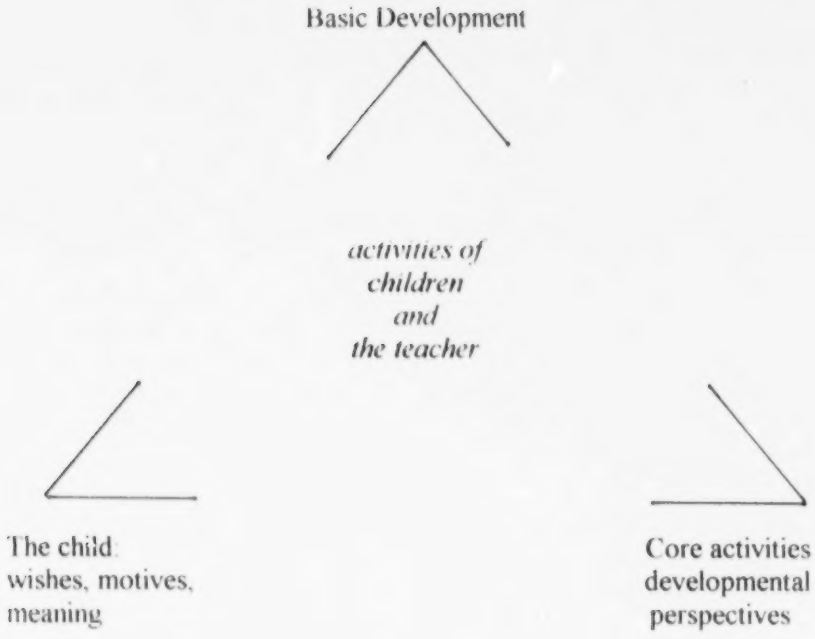
In a similar way developmental perspectives have been outlined for the other core activities. There is a close connection and overlap of core activities. They are of importance for 4 to 7- or 8-year-olds, in any case for the first three grades (or age groups) of primary schools. Reading and writing activities, for instance are just as relevant for the very young as for the 6-year-olds; the nature of these activities and the nature in which children handle them differ of course. The same goes for role play activities for instance; also for 6-year-olds role play is of essential importance. In comparison with 4-year-olds there will be differences, however, as to the nature of the play and the play themes.

It is the task of the teachers to supply the children with those activities that (may) stimulate their development most at that particular moment. No easy task, because the teacher has to go through this selection process time after time. Course methods and programmes cannot relieve the teacher of this task, because they cannot be based on the three sources or approaches that a teacher should always include in the selecting process.

These sources are:

* **The child** in question: what is it interested in, what motives has the child itself, what meaning does it attach to certain activities or contents; what is its actual developmental level.
* **Intentions of Basic Development**: what may a certain activity contribute to aspects of Basic Development which require special attention at a particular moment.
* **Core activities and developmental perspectives**: how can the present quality of the activity be enhanced; in which direction should the activity develop.

These three sources are visualised in a triangle diagram. In the centre we see the question which activity is relevant and what part the teacher herself/himself has in it.



Teachers use this same diagram for activity-oriented observing and registration. Observing is indubitably necessary in order to select the most appropriate supply of activities and in order to determine the possibilities to stimulate development within the activity.

Within the scope of this paper it is impossible to go further into the essence of activity-oriented observing. Neither do we go further into the actual interventions and guiding possibilities of the teacher, but this aspect may be illustrated by the practical application of core activities and developmental perspectives in the following section.

4. A PRACTICAL APPLICATION: THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERACY THROUGH ROLE PLAY

The guiding principle in Basic Development is the development of play activity toward learning activity. What this means for the actual education practice will be shown through the emerging literacy of young children. We will dwell on the following points in particular:

* the meaning of reading and writing for young children;
* developmental perspectives;
* the aims of reading and writing activities;
* activities;
* the role of the teacher.

4.1. The meaning of reading and writing for young children

Young children give meaning to reading and writing activities completely their own way. We mention some essential meanings:

* *Having a nice read together*
Young children need secure, supportive contacts with the adults around them. Reading together fulfils this need and is as such a very important activity. Children love this intimacy and thus discover the reassuring, relaxing imaginative aspects of books, poems and rhymes.
* *Curiosity about the real functions of reading and writing.*
Young children want to know about reality. They also want to know what part reading and writing actually play in it. Their desire to take part in real, functional reading and writing activities grows.
* *Interest in books*
Children grow interested in the world of books. They start to see that the world has other things to offer than just the ordinary everyday reality. In a book you can get lost and come home at the same time, confuse fantasy and reality but also come across factual information.
* *Pretending to read and write*
Young children play their way into the adult world. In role play they express their ideas. They want to act out the pertaining roles as realistically as possible and reading and writing also go with this. Within role play reading and writing are self-evident and indispensable.
* *Becoming a real reader and writer yourself*
Being a big boy or girl requires being able to read and write. Children start to see that pretending to read and write, for which they make use of their own scribbles and invented ways of writing, will no longer do. They want to make use of printed text as adults do. They know quite well that adults read and write differently.

One of the most important issues of Basic Development pertains to the necessity of meaningful learning situations. Children have to be able to attach their own meaning to learning activities. This also applies to the reading and writing actvities which children undertake. Only meaningful reading and writing activities have the inherent potential to stimulate development and learning.
It could be said that taking part in meaningful, understood reading and writing activities enables children to broaden and deepen their activities. They can conceive of and perform the activities of reading and writing in a way befitting in our society. This, however, does **not** come naturally nor is it automatically done correctly. Teachers need to induce and stimulate this process. By participating instead of adopting a waiting attitude they challenge children to engage upon reading and writing activities which they can almost but not yet quite perform on their own.
Thus development of literacy is elicited without overasking or leaving the children to cope for themselves. The teacher always takes care of those parts of the activity which the child cannot cope with independently.

4.2. Developmental perspectives

Long before young children receive reading and writing instruction they already have quite some insight in the functions and the structure of oral and written language. All 4-year-olds are to some extent literate beings when they enter school. Of course there are sometimes big differences to be seen between children, but it is evident that all children have acquired some experiences with printed language and books before they go to school.
In Basic Development we link up with this development that has already been set into motion by means of an astute supply of relevant reading and writing activities as well as having the teacher share in these activities in a development-inductive way.
Doing this the teacher has a developmental perspective in mind in which the following aspects are important:

* development of play;
* development of oral language;
* development of ideas about books;
* learning how to read;
* learning how to write.

The diagram shows the developmental perpsectives we bear in mind.

3/4 years old — about 7 years old

1 Play	Manipulative play Role Play		Learning activity
	- role inherent actions - thematic role play - playing at reading and writing		- actual reading and writing
2 Oral language	Spoken language	Thought Language	Professional language
	- language to put into words/describe - here-and-now language - meaning of words	- language for reasoning - language for thinking about the future - relations between meanings of words	- making your own text
3 Ideas about books	Reading pictures	Book language	Reading text
	- a book is read to you - reading pictures - retelling in informal language	- retell a story in book language	- read fragments of the book - direct attention exclusively to text
4 Reading	Reading together		Reading yourself
	- reading together with adults - reading in play		- symbol consciousness - symbol-sound linking
5 Writing	Drawing	Writing in play	Conventional writing
	- writing drawing - no distinction between writing and drawing	- scribbled messages - forms that resemble letters - familiar letters	- conventional spelling - handwriting

The most important part in the developmental perspectives is certainly that learning how to read and write will only be really possible if and when the children have understood the functions of reading and writing in role play activities. If they have had the opportunity to pretend to be able to read and write and in doing so, slowly but surely the demand for the actual skill of reading and writing grows, only then it makes sense for children to pursue reading and writing in intentional learning activities.

4.3. The aims of reading and writing activities

Reading and writing activities contribute not only to specific knowledge and skills, but to all aspects of Basic Development.

a. Basic characteristics

Important basic characteristics are directly related to reading and writing activities. It is of importance that the child:

* wants to be a reader/writer himself;
* is curious about all kinds of reading and writing activities;
* can and wants to participate in reading and writing activities in his own way.

b. Broad development

With reading and writing activities teachers also have broad development in mind by:

* keeping reading and writing activities intact, not splitting them up in disconnected parts that have little or no cohesion;
* giving reading and writing activities a place in connection with other activities and always in functional and communicative contexts;
* always stimulating children to reflect on their reading and writing activities.

c. Specific knowledge and skills

Naturally, also the specific knowledge and skills are of importance. There are two main points to be considered:

* Specific knowledge and skills are only meaningful for children, they only benefit from them and develop them, when they integrate them in a meaningful way in relevant and understood reading and writing activities. First and foremost young children have to be and remain enthusiastic readers and writers.
* Children have to learn particularly to regard reading and writing activities as literate activities in which negociating about meanings comes first and in which broad aims feature, like communication, problem-solving and reflection.

4.4. Activities

The reading and writing activities in which young children participate can be found in some five areas. They are:

a. Play activities

All kinds of play activities in which reading and writing are an inherent part of the game-concept and the roles. Think of:

* writing a letter in the house-corner;
* taking an order in the restaurant.

b. Activities with books

Think of:

* reading books together and talking about them;
* language-print activities.

c. Functional reading and writing activities

* all kinds of texts of their own, based on drawings, excursions and discoveries;
* writing letters to others within or outside the school.

d. Learning how to read

For instance:

* working with own reading books: stamping self-made texts or copying stamped texts;
* working with signal words, known words being the basis for developing symbol knowledge, analysis and synthesis.

e. Learning how to write

Think of:

* all kinds of play situations and materials in which fine motor skills are used and practised;
* activities and materials with a view to learning connected handwriting such as writing-patterns or worksheets.

Many valuable activities can be organized to which children can give their own meaning and in which teachers can stimulate development.

4.5. The role of the teacher

Whether or not reading and writing activities have or will have developmental value for children mainly depends on the way the teacher fulfils her stimulating role.
Some essential elements of this role within the framework of reading and writing activities are:

a. Conditions

The teacher serves as a model for the children, which entails that she uses language correctly and writes neatly and wihout errors. Teachers take children seriously; they have a lot of patience and respect for children's own language. They stimulate reading and writing but do not force children. They make it clear that they regard reading and writing activities neither as more nor as less important than e.g. play activities or discussion.

b. Activity-settings

Teachers provide a well-prepared and carefully considered organisation of classroom and corners. They regularly supply new materials and meet a demand, enabling the children:

* to play at reading and writing;
* to read and write together;
* to read and write by themselves.

c. Planning

Teachers help children to choose activities which are attractive and interesting for the child itself and which create a new zone of proximal development. They assist children to make a proper start by planning the activity together, by discussing things like the sequence of actions, the necessary materials or instruments, and the possibly needed help

d. **Guiding and directing**

Teachers help the children attach more, different and new meanings to their reading and writing activities. This can be done in different ways:

Demonstrating

Especially demonstrating how to use written language is very important. Children have a lot to tell at play, during activities and about drawings. What they say can be written down and become printed text. Teachers take care of that part of the activity for the child and show at the same time how it shoud be done. The following questions are relevant in this respect:

- 'Shall I write down what you told me?'
- 'What would you like me to write down of all the things you thought of?'
- 'I will read it out to you so you can say if you like it.'
- 'Would you like me to change it?'

This demonstrating stimulates the child to acquire a number of important insights that are relevant in connection with literacy; insights such as:

- what you think you can put in words and write down;
- what is written can be read;
- what is written can be kept;
- text consists of sentences and words.

Cooperation

In cooperation the teacher takes care of one aspect of the activity, that is to say, that particular aspect that the child cannot perform independently. Reading a book together serves as a good example. The child that is reading along is already doing a lot itself with the text and illustrations: looking at the pictures, thinking about all that is going on, following the thread of the story, thinking ahead and fantasizing, etc.

Dialogues and interaction

Interactions and dialogues are meant to have children think about numerous aspects of reading and writing activities. With respect to this we have in mind:

- talking together about what happened in the story: 'What do you think, was there really a crocodile under Peggy's bed?';
- improving self-made texts: 'I think this is not quite right, what do you think?';
- reflecting on play situations: 'Did you manage to make the price tags in the shop?'

Helping children along

Sometimes the teacher takes more initiative. This is especially necessary when children need an explanation, instruction or an assignment. While giving guidance it is necessary to determine which children need a particular explanation, instruction or assignment and which children do not.

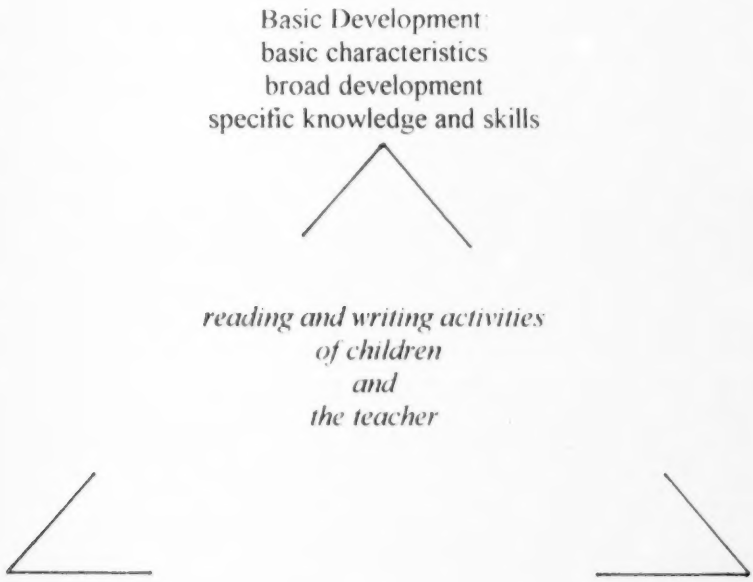
e. **Observing children**

Guiding and directing children requires activity-oriented observing. Children differ in level of literacy, language-thought development and in the way in which they are involved in reading and writing activities.

Teachers observe what a child does, knows and is able to do by itself as well as what it can and wants to do in cooperation with others (the teacher). If a teacher knows that, she is able to assess what guidance and direction is called for.

For the choice of the appropriate interventions and of a relevant supply of activities the by now familiar 'sources' of the triangle present themselves again:

* the child, its motives and wishes; the meanings it attaches itself to activities;
* the aims of Basic Development;
* the developmental perspectives of reading and writing activities.



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